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La narrativa del Brexit en Twitter: un análisis cognitivo del  
símil en inglés

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## **Abstract**

Simile has been traditionally overshadowed by metaphor in linguistic studies. Both figures have been regarded as almost identical to each other, and simile has been thought to constitute an inferior, weaker type of metaphor. However, recent papers (Cuenca, 2015; Romano, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020) state the independency and effectiveness of similes and the need of this figure to be studied on its own. Therefore, the present essay aims at offering an in-depth corpus-based analysis of similes in English. Our corpus consists of 90 tweets that were published on the social platform Twitter between October 2019 and March 2020, and which use similes to talk about Brexit. This corpus-based analysis provides an answer to three questions: a) What are the main mappings that are established when comparing Brexit and something else? b) When, how, and why are these similes accompanied by an elaboration? c) Are these similes convertible into metaphors? The present research offers the following answers: a) Most tweets create counterfactual scenarios and use source domains such as physical violence or fire to describe Brexit. b) Since the majority of the similes are non-conventional, most tweets are followed by an elaboration that establishes the grounds for the comparison. c) Those similes that are conventional can be transformed into metaphors; however, most of them cannot be transformed, given their non-conventionality.

Keywords: simile, metaphor, Twitter, Brexit, elaboration.

## Resumen

Tradicionalmente, el símil ha estado a la sombra de la metáfora en los estudios sobre lingüística. Se ha considerado que ambas figuras eran casi idénticas y se ha creído que el símil era un tipo inferior y más débil de metáfora. Sin embargo, estudios recientes (Cuenca, 2015; Romano, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020) afirman la independencia y la efectividad de los símiles, y defienden que esta figura debe estudiarse por sí misma. De este modo, este artículo analiza en profundidad un corpus formado por símiles en inglés. Nuestro corpus cuenta con 90 tuits que fueron publicado en la red social Twitter entre octubre de 2019 y marzo de 2020, y que utilizan símiles para hablar del Brexit. Este análisis ofrece una respuesta a tres preguntas: a) ¿Cuáles son los principales dominios que se utilizan para comparar el Brexit con otra entidad? b) ¿Cuándo, cómo y por qué van estos símiles acompañados por una elaboración? c) ¿Estos símiles pueden convertirse en metáforas? Este trabajo da las siguientes respuestas: a) La mayoría de los tuits utilizan escenarios contrafactivos y dominios fuente tales como la violencia física o el fuego para describir el Brexit. b) Debido a que la mayoría de los símiles son no-convencionales, casi todos los tuits incluyen una elaboración que establece la base de la comparación. c) Aquellos símiles que son convencionales pueden convertirse en metáforas; sin embargo, la mayoría de ellos no pueden, ya que son no-convencionales.

Palabras clave: símil, metáfora, Twitter, Brexit, elaboración.

## Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. State of the Art.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Corpus, objectives and methodology .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5. Analysis of similes in tweets dealing with Brexit.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5.1. “Brexit is like...”: main mappings .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5.1.1. Counterfactual scenarios .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5.1.2. People.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5.1.3. Physical violence .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>5.1.4. Relationships .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>5.1.5. TV series, films, and fictional characters.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.1.6. Fire and accidents .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.2. Elaboration: occasional or necessary? .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5.3. Can similes be transformed into metaphors? .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>6. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>7. References .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>8. Appendix: corpus of analysis .....</b>	<b>29</b>

## 1. Introduction

Figurative language has been traditionally considered a matter of literary language only. In this sense, figures such as metaphor, metonymy or hyperbole were regarded as mere means for achieving a poetic, aesthetic effect. However, with the arrival of works such as Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors we live by* (1980), figurative language started to be understood as a phenomenon occurring not only in literature, but also in daily communication. Especially within the field of Cognitive Linguistics, metaphors and other linguistic tools are said to govern "our everyday commonsense reasoning" (Peña, 2003: 15). Furthermore, although these phenomena had been treated as figures of speech, cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff and his collaborators (Mark Johnson, Mark Turner) have claimed that they actually are figures of thought: "The generalizations governing poetic metaphorical expressions are not in language, but in thought: they are general mappings across conceptual domains" (Lakoff, 1993: 203).

Within the vast typology of figures of thought, simile is a special case. For decades, it was considered to be a kind of metaphor (or, on the contrary, metaphor was considered to be a kind of simile by some authors, as we will see in Section 2), the literature on it being consequently scarce. However, recent research argues for the autonomy of simile from metaphor and considers it as a basic figure of speech that has to be explored independently (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020).

According to Romano (2017: 2), a simile is "a conceptual and discursive process of analogy" which not only differs from metaphors in a formal and structural way, but also in terms of its discursive functions. As this author also claims, these two figures are not the same, as some of the past literature has stated: "they would not be cognitively or linguistically efficient" (2017: 2) if they were completely identical. For these reasons, simile needs to be studied on its own, without it being considered as dependent on metaphor.

One area in which figurative language is fundamental is that of politics. In political speech, tools such as metaphors and metonymies are frequently employed, as has been observed by several scholars (e.g. Beard, 2000; Ungerer and Schmid, 1996). However, even in specialised books on political language such as Beard's, simile has been paid very little attention. On account on this, the present paper aims at exploring how simile is used to talk about a particular political event: Brexit.

Brexit is a crucial socio-political occurrence in the recent history of Europe. This name, which is a portmanteau word consisting of “Br” (that is, British) and “exit”, refers to the retreat of the United Kingdom from the European Union. This process started in 2016, when the British government celebrated a referendum for citizens to vote whether they preferred the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union or not. The most voted option was that of leaving the European Union (51.9 leave *versus* 48.1 remain<sup>1</sup>). Since then, the United Kingdom has been immersed in a tense and complicated process of withdrawal that will be final at the end of 2020.

As Brexit is such an important event for all European citizens, especially for those living in the United Kingdom, it is frequently addressed in daily conversations. People living in the United Kingdom have used many different platforms to express their opinion on this event, and social media have been no exception. From among the various social media, this dissertation explores the use of Twitter to address Brexit concerns. In particular, it studies tweets that include similes, that is, that compare Brexit with something else. As is further explained in Section 4, the corpus of study is formed by 90 tweets containing similes on Brexit. Furthermore, the study shows how and why such similes are accompanied by an elaboration or explanation, and answers the question on whether these similes can be replaced by metaphors. This exploration will be carried out within the framework provided by recent developments in figurative language use within Cognitive Linguistics (see Ruiz de Mendoza and Pérez, 2011, Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2014, Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020).

With these objectives in mind, this essay is organised as follows. Section 2 offers a critical overview of the literature on simile and metaphor. Section 3 introduces the theoretical framework on which this study is based, with special attention to the relationship between metaphor and simile. Section 4 describes the corpus of analysis and discusses the research methodology. Section 5 consists of the analysis of the corpus of tweets. Finally, the main findings are summarised in Section 6.

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<sup>1</sup> “EU Referendum Results”

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20160630063455/https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information>> (Accessed 6 June 2020)



## 2. State of the Art

The literature on simile has traditionally been divided into two separate trends: the equivalence and the non-equivalence views. On the one hand, the equivalence view claims that a metaphor is a simile with an elliptic “like”. On the contrary, the non-equivalence view sees both figures as separate ones.

Following the equivalence view, simile and metaphor are “variants of a unique (or very similar) conceptual process of analogy” (Romano, 2017: 4). This perspective dates back to Aristotle, who claimed that metaphor is the main term, whereas simile is “a special, slightly inferior, type of metaphor” (Addison, 1993: 402). In other words, metaphor is the more general figure of the two, while simile is merely a metaphor made explicit (Israel et al., 2004: 123).

However, the equivalence view has been challenged by several authors who, rather, claim that metaphors and similes are distinct. Many scholars that have addressed the relationship between these two figures argue that metaphor is the strongest of the two, since similes lack the “distinctive power and effectiveness of a good metaphor” (Black, 1993: 31). The same argument is provided by Glucksberg and Keysar (1993: 406), who state that similes are weaker than metaphors and that “similes can always be intensified by putting them in metaphor form”. These authors further argue that similes can be used as hedges, and that they are more difficult to understand than metaphors because they “do not express the class-inclusion relation explicitly” (Glucksberg and Keysar, 1990: 16). Saeed (2009) prefers metaphors over similes, since the former “go further by causing a transference” (2009: 359) in the attributes that are being mapped from one element into another. Against Black, Glucksberg and Keysar, and Saeed, Bernández (2009: 71) points out that simile allows readers to achieve richer results than metaphor.

For Chiappe and Kennedy (2000) similes are not less comprehensible than metaphors, nor are they weaker. Chiappe et al. (2003) study two factors that influence the choice between a metaphor and a simile: aptness and comprehensibility. For them, the main difference between these figures is their degree of aptness, that is, to what extent they “capture important features of a topic” (2003: 51). In this sense, these authors claim that when the degree of aptness is greater, and thus the comparison can be easily understood, the metaphorical form is preferred. On the contrary, the simile form is preferred when the degree of aptness is low. In other words, simile is preferred when the two elements compared “do not share many common properties” (Romano, 2017: 7). This characteristic has been also captured by other authors, such as Israel et al. (2004), who claim that similes compare entities that are or are construed as being

“unlikely to be compared” (2004: 125). These authors further state that similes encourage “one to search for similarities where one would not expect to find them, and to make connections across concepts which seem otherwise unconnected” (2004: 126). The fact that similes usually link two entities that do not have salient common properties gives rise to what is known as the elaboration, that is, an explanation that usually follows a simile and whose function is to establish the grounds for the comparison. This feature will be further explored in Sections 3 and 5.

Along these lines, Utsumi (2007) alludes to “interpretive diversity” when dealing with the differences between metaphors and similes. This term refers to “the semantic richness of the figurative interpretation of a topic-vehicle pair” (2007: 291) and it is determined by “the number of features involved in the interpretation and the uniformity of salience distribution of those features” (Romano, 2017: 8). Utsumi’s paper argues that the more diverse the entities being compared, the easier their comprehensibility. In this case, the metaphorical form should be preferred. On the other hand, if the topic-vehicle pair is less diverse, “it is predicted that the metaphor [*sic*] form should be less comprehensible than the corresponding simile form” (Utsumi, 2007: 301). As Romano (2017) concludes, these claims support the fact that “Life is a journey” is preferred over “Life is like a journey,” while “Highways are like snakes” is preferred over “Highways are snakes” (examples from Utsumi, 2007: 291-292).

More recently, Cuenca (2015) and Romano (2017) deal with simile and its relationship with metaphor from a cognitive approach. In these papers, especially in Romano’s, the main objective is to prove whether these figures are interchangeable, as much of the previous literature had claimed, or not.

Cuenca (2015: 140) starts by defining simile as “a three-slot comparative construction” that includes a source and a target that are normally felt as “non-comparable”, and also an “optional but frequent and highly significant” explanation or elaboration. Furthermore, this author states that similes are powerful in expressing opinions and catching someone else’s attention, and that they tend to have prominence when used in texts, either as their headline or at the very end (2015: 159).

In turn, Romano (2017: 28) explains why metaphors can be usually transformed into similes, but the inverse process “depends on very specific cognitive, semantic, formal, and pragmatic parameters”. According to this author, this is due to the fact that similes use more complex, unconventional mappings than metaphors. Therefore, they “need specific socio-cultural and cognitive cues for comprehension” (2017: 21), which is normally achieved by means of the elaboration. As this author points out, the elaboration activates a certain frame that allows the

reader to fully comprehend the comparison. The more unconventional the mapping, the more necessary the elaboration so as to offer the reader the required socio-cultural context in order to correctly interpret the simile. Furthermore, the word *like*, which is essential in similes, acts as a “space builder” that announces the dissimilarity that is to come. In other words, *like* “prepares the reader/listener for something new, unexpected” (2017: 27). While the metaphorical form is based on common knowledge, similes allow readers/hearers to guess, to “dare” at unexpected mappings.

Romano concludes that, although it is true that both figures rely upon well-known concepts that belong to common cultural knowledge, in the case of similes it is the relationship itself which is non-conventional: “the reader is familiar with the frames triggered by the source and target but has no information on how or why they are being compared” (Romano, 2017: 27). This is why, she concludes, an elaboration is frequently needed in similes but not in metaphors, and also why these two figures cannot be interchanged in all contexts.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

As was stated in the introduction, the goal of this dissertation is to analyse Brexit similes by means of the tools offered by Cognitive Linguistics. This theoretical framework was born in the 1980s in the United States, and its initial tenets, based on the work of theorists like George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, and Leonard Talmy, have been summarized as follows (Cuenca and Hilferty, 1999: 19):

1. The study on language must go hand in hand with its cognitive and communicative function, i.e. language needs to be studied according to its use.
2. Categorization is understood as a mental process of organization based on conceptual structures.
3. Language is inherently symbolic, and its most important function is to mean.
4. Grammar organises semantic content and, thus, meaning is seen as an essential part of grammar.
5. Language is dynamic and, as such, all its levels (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse) cannot be understood as completely independent from one another.

These five tenets, based on Langacker's (1987, 1991) seminal proposals, were restructured by Croft and Cruse (2004: 1) into three main hypotheses: first, language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty; second, grammar is conceptualization; and third, knowledge of language emerges from language use.

Additionally, Cuenca and Hilferty (1999: 14) state that Cognitive Linguistics is included within the multidisciplinary field of cognitive science, in which disciplines such as psychology, anthropology and artificial intelligence are also contained. As Adriaens (1993: 142) defines it, cognitive science is "a contemporary scientific paradigm that is attempting to bring together a number of existing fields in a concerted effort to study the complex domain of cognition/intelligence in its broadest sense."

Along these lines, Cognitive Linguistics is based on the philosophical trend of experiential realism (Cuenca and Hilferty, 1999: 15), a term proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The main principle of experiential realism, contrary to Chomsky's Generative Linguistics, is that language is based on our world experience. This way, Cognitive Linguistics makes use of real data from real, non-idealised uses of language.

The notion of *cognitive* model, originally put forward by Lakoff (1987), is of special relevance in this field. According to Lakoff (2007), cognitive models “are used to structure and make sense of our experience, and each element in such a model can correspond to a category of mind” (2007: 134). In other words, these models consist of conceptual prototypes around which knowledge is organised. This author distinguished four types of cognitive models, namely: image-schematic, metaphoric, metonymic, and symbolic (2007: 134). Of all of them, metaphorical cognitive models are of greater interest for the purposes of this essay. Let us offer a deeper description of them, as we will later do with similes.

As noted in the introduction, metaphor —along with figurative language in general— has usually been regarded as a matter of language, mostly used for aesthetic purposes, which is why it abounds in literary language. However, Lakoff (1993) argued that, in fact, metaphor is first a matter of thought, which is why it is part of our daily communication and used to deal with abstract thinking (e.g. concepts like time, states, change, causation, and purpose) in terms of concrete experience.

A metaphor is “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system,” and *metaphorical expression* refers to the “the surface realization of such a cross-domain mapping” (Lakoff 193: 203). A mapping is a set of correspondences between two conceptual domains where one, called the *source*, is used to reason and talk about the other, called the *target*. The conventional metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY has often been used to illustrate this point. It consists of the correspondences laid out in Fig.1 below.

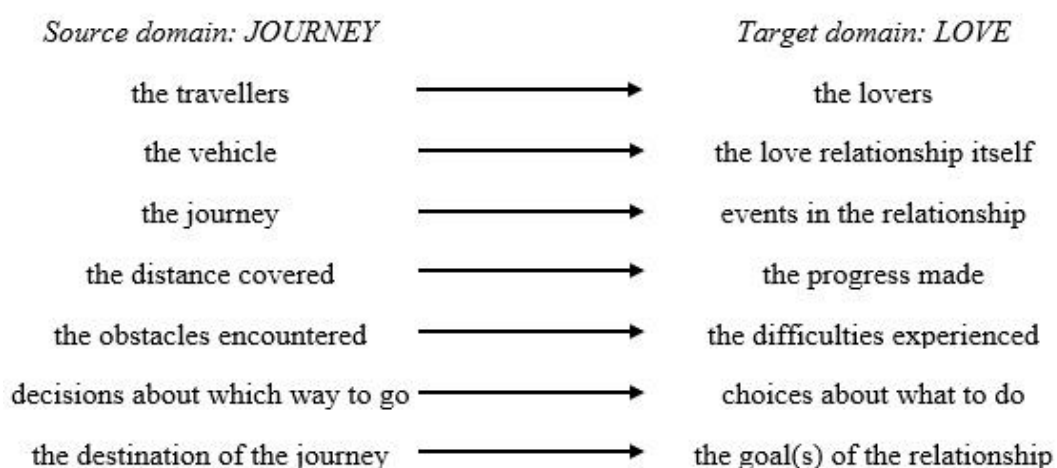


Figure 1. Mappings of the LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. (Kövecses, 2010: 9)

This metaphor gives rise to several metaphorical expressions. Some examples are: *Our relationship has hit a dead-end street*, *Look how far we’ve come*, *We may have to go our*

*separate ways, The relationship isn't going anywhere.* In this metaphor, we understand the target domain (love) in terms of the source domain (journeys). For this reason, there are entities in the target domain (e.g. the lovers, their common goals, their difficulties, and so on) that “correspond systematically” (Lakoff, 1993: 207) to entities in the source domain (respectively, the travellers, the destination, the difficulties encountered, etc.). As Ungerer and Schmid (1996: 120) point out, “what is transferred, then, by a metaphor is the structure, the internal relation or the logic of a cognitive model.”

In addition, the distinction between resemblance and correlation in metaphors is crucial for studying their relationship with similes. These two terms, *resemblance* and *correlation*, refer to the two cognitive processes (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020: 18) that give rise to metaphors. As Grady (1997) argues, resemblance involves the “perception of common aspects” between the two domains. An example of this kind is “Achilles is a lion,” which points at the similarities in behaviour and personality that both Achilles and lions share: courage, bravery, ferocity, etc.

On the other hand, the correlation operation does not “involve shared features but only co-occurrence” (Grady, 1997: 223) of events in our experience. A well-known example is that of MORE IS UP, with conventional metaphorical expressions such as “Prices have gone up recently.” This metaphor is feasible because it is grounded in experience: for instance, if we pour water into a glass, the more water, the higher its level inside the glass. What Cognitive Linguistics argues, therefore, is that we have brought this knowledge that arises from experience into our way of communicating.

The difference between resemblance and correlation is important for the relationship between metaphors and similes, as stated above, because it is one of the factors that determine whether a metaphor can be transformed into a simile or not. As Ruiz de Mendoza (2020: 33) states, only the metaphors based on resemblance can be converted into similes, while correlation metaphors cannot. For example, the previous instance of “Achilles is a lion” can be transformed into “Achilles is like a lion”; however, the expression “Prices have gone up recently,” which is based on experiential correlation, cannot function as a simile. In the same way, not all similes can be transformed into metaphors, as we shall see in Section 5.

As regards similes, Ruiz de Mendoza (2020) includes them in his classification of basic figures of speech, along with metaphors, metonymies, irony, paradox, and so on. A basic figure of speech, as this author defines it, is “one whose conceptual structure and meaning effects cannot be accounted for in terms of other figures” (2020: 17). What is more, all these figures are grounded in cognitive operations, such as finding similarities between concepts, as in the case of metaphors and similes (2020: 18). On the contrary, non-basic figures of speech (such

as hypocatastasis, synesthesia, or synecdoche, among others) are not the result of different cognitive processes; rather, they “simply combine them in a variety of manners” (2020: 18).

Simile was defined in the introduction as “a conceptual and discursive process of analogy” (Romano, 2017: 2) that needs to be regarded as independent from metaphor and studied on its own. As Ruiz de Mendoza (2020: 18) points out, from a formal point of view, there are two broad types of simile in English: similes based on *like* (e.g. *John is like a tree*) and similes based on the *as-as* construction (e.g. *John is as tall as a tree*). In the case of the first type, *like*-based similes are open-ended: there is no limit to the number of attributes that can be mapped “other than those imposed by our knowledge of the concepts involved” (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020: 18). This means that, in the example, we need to know John and to be aware of how tall he is in order to figure out that the comparison with a tree is related to it. This lack of a limit in the attributes which we can compare is related to the greater need of elaboration in this kind of simile, as we shall discuss later. On the other hand, similes based on the *as-as* construction are close-ended, that is, the construction itself isolates the attribute that is being mapped between the two *as* particles. In the example, there are no other possible attributes to be compared apart from “tall”, which is explicitly mentioned in the sentence. In the case of close-ended similes, therefore, further elaboration is not necessary, unlike in open-ended similes.

For the purposes of this essay, only open-ended similes will be regarded. Firstly, because this paper precisely aims at exploring how, why and when the elaboration is used in *like*-based similes. Secondly, because our other main purpose is to determine whether similes and metaphors are interchangeable or not, and this transformation is not possible in close-ended similes, given that they do not make use of *like*. The sentence “John is like a tree” can be easily transformed into “John is a tree”. However, “John is as tall as a tree” is not convertible into a metaphor in the same way.

As for open-ended similes, let us now look at their formal structure. As Romano (2017: 2) explains, these figures consist of two elements, A and B, such that A is the target and B is the source, marked by *like*. Element A can be also called topic or *comparandum*, that is, “the entity described by the simile” (2017: 2), while B is the vehicle or *comparatum*. The third element is the *tertium comparationis* or elaboration.

Romano (2017: 2) offers an example to illustrate this structure: *Independence is like an elephant — difficult to describe but instantly recognizable*. In this case, *independence* is A, the topic or target domain, while *elephant* is B, the vehicle or source domain. The elaboration corresponds to “difficult to describe but instantly recognizable”. Therefore, we understand independence in terms of its relationship with elephants, and the cue for establishing this

relationship is given in the elaboration. Without this elaboration, the comparison would be hardly understandable, since the two elements being compared have no common properties at first sight; we need this explanation so as to make sense of the way in which they can be similar and, thus, compared.

As Cuenca (2015: 154) puts it, “the elaboration is a non-obligatory but frequent component of a simile.” Some authors, however, do not give it much prominence. For example, Israel et al. (2004: 130) assert that it is “sometimes” used, and Pierini (2007: 27) claims that there are two types of similes: explicit (with an elaboration) and implicit (without an elaboration). Nevertheless, the findings made by Cuenca (2015) and Romano (2017) support the idea that the elaboration is much more than occasional: in most similes, as we shall see in Section 5, it is indeed included. This is so because of the fact that similes compare entities that are normally felt as non-comparable, as mentioned in previous sections. In general terms, Cuenca (2015: 159) argues that the elaboration, when it is placed immediately after the core structure of the simile, makes this construction much more effective.

Within a cognitive-linguistic framework, similes are regarded as denotational figures involving re-construal (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020: 33). They are denotational because they reason about entities, situations, or events in terms of other entities, situations, or events; and they are based on re-construal because they help us understand target-domain conceptual structure in terms of source-domain structure and logic. Metaphor, as this author argues, is also denotational and based on re-construal.



#### 4. Corpus, objectives and methodology

The analysis for this dissertation is a corpus-based one. The corpus consists of 90 tweets, written in English, which were published on Twitter between October 2019 and March 2020. Twitter is a microblogging platform in which users write small statements, up to 280 characters, known as “tweets”. It is one of the best-known social media nowadays and it is used globally.

Twitter was chosen as the source for our corpus because of its popularity and extraordinary usage statistics: according to Internet Live Stats, this platform receives an average of 6,000 new tweets per second<sup>2</sup>. It is, therefore, a suitable platform to explore how speakers express themselves and to what extent is figurative language present in our daily communication.

The search for the tweets that would be part of our corpus was carried out in the following way. By means of the “Search” tool in this platform, I typed the words “Brexit is like” to retrieve tweets that would include *like*-similes. Although some tweets contained literal comparisons, the vast majority corresponded to figurative uses of this construction.

Our search was not intended to find any aspect of these similes in particular (for example, if they included an elaboration or not, or the entities to which Brexit was compared), but even such a straightforward search evidenced certain properties that many of the tweets shared: as we will discuss in Section 5, most of the similes do include an elaboration, and some mappings are iteratively used.

As was stated in Section 1, this essay has three main objectives, which are:

1. To study how similes are used on Twitter to talk about Brexit. For this purpose, we will explore the main mappings that can be identified.
2. To determine how, when and why these similes are accompanied by an elaboration, and what is the effect of this elaboration.
3. To explore whether the similes from our corpus can be transformed into metaphors, and to explain why or why not.

Because of space constraints, not all of the 90 examples from our corpus will be discussed in depth in this essay, but only those which are especially representative or interesting for the purposes of this paper.

In addition, this essay follows a deductive methodology. Therefore, it starts from hypotheses previously made in the literature and puts them to a test through observation. It also formulates generalizations based on partial observations and tries to (totally or partially) validate or refute

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<sup>2</sup> “Twitter Usage Statistics”

<<https://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/>> (Accessed 9 June 2020)

them through further observations. Finally, it is important to note that, although the number of instances chosen and studied is large, the analysis is qualitative rather than quantitative.

## 5. Analysis of similes in tweets dealing with Brexit

This section provides an in-depth analysis of some of the most representative tweets from our corpus. First, Section 5.1 offers an explanation of some of the main mappings that have been established when describing Brexit. Section 5.2 discusses the elaboration; namely, it analyses whether it is present or absent in the examples from our corpus, the reasons behind this, and the purpose, if any, for its use. Finally, Section 5.3 studies if these similes can be transformed into metaphors.

### 5.1. “Brexit is like...”: main mappings

The purpose of this section is to explore the entities that were compared with Brexit in the tweets included in our corpus. Despite the high number of instances analysed, most mappings were iteratively employed, such as people, physical violence, or various stages of romantic relationships (e.g. dates, marriages, divorces), as we shall see later. However, the vast majority of the tweets shared one common feature, no matter the particular mapping involved: speakers built counterfactual scenarios to explain what Brexit is for them, or to express how they feel about this political event.

#### 5.1.1. Counterfactual scenarios

As argued by Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2005: 263), counterfactual sentences are a subcase of contrafactive utterances, which consist of “expressions that commit the speaker to the falsity of the proposition or propositions expressed by one or more of its constituent clauses.” Along these lines, a counterfactual scenario is “a hypothetical scenario that is counter to reality or false” (Ferguson, 2012: 942). Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2005) explore the following example to illustrate this kind of construction: *If Clinton were the Titanic, the iceberg would sink*. This sentence was created when, despite of the numerous political scandals related to President Clinton, his political status remained undamaged. In this case, the utterance establishes an unrealistic, unfeasible scenario, and therefore does not lie on the inferences arising from the reality about what happened to the Titanic. Rather, it reframes this event and gives it new inferences (Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza, 2005: 265).

In the case of the tweets included in our corpus, many examples follow this same structure. Let us now see some of them:

- (1) *Trying to understand Brexit is like trying to figure out what colour the letter seven smells like (2)*<sup>3</sup>.
- (2) *Voting for the Tories to fix Brexit is like calling the man who nearly beat you to death for medical assistance (18).*
- (3) *Brexit is like trying to fix a fire damaged house by setting it on fire again (46).*
- (4) *Brexit is like Snakes & Ladders. But there's no ladders, or snakes. Neither is there an end to the board... and somebody lost the dice. And the board is on fire, eternally (30).*
- (5) *Voting for Boris because you want Brexit is like hiring Pennywise because you want a babysitter (68).*

In all these cases, the grounds for the comparison are not the source domains themselves, but the unreality and absurdity of the situations they give rise to. In (1), the situation described in the sentence has no sense whatsoever. (2) and (3) both depict a negative situation in which the proposed solution is even more harmful. (4) creates an impossible scenario based on the name of a game and its associated frame (the players need a dice and a board on which to play). As for (5), it makes use of the knowledge about this film character and then relates it to a scenario in which his presence would be utterly undesirable.

### 5.1.2. People

The majority of the similes related to people that our corpus includes depict people in a very specific way: they mostly represent situations in which people announce their leaving but actually remain where they are:

- (6) *Brexit is like when that one friend slaps their knees and loudly proclaims "RIGHT, I'm away" but then they just carry on sitting there (88).*

This kind of comparison is a clear allegory for the United Kingdom's long process of withdrawal from the European Union: since 2016, the attempts to make this withdrawal final have been numerous, although unsuccessful on most occasions.

Other examples represent people with a hypocritical or questionable attitude, that is, people who lie, deceive, or make empty promises:

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<sup>3</sup> The number before the example corresponds to the number in the text. The number after the example corresponds to the position of the example in our corpus (Appendix).

(7) *The Tory approach to Brexit is like a man who deliberately wears uncomfortable shoes, that are far too small for his feet. He tells everyone that they should vote for him because he can promise less pain by taking the shoes off* (27).

In this case, the simile is not employed to criticise the Brexit process itself, but the behaviour of some British politicians, as in (2) and (5).

### **5.1.3. Physical violence**

Within the field of physical violence, many of the tweets explicitly mentioned amputations that are carried out in an irrational, unthinking way:

(8) *Brexit is like having something wrong with your leg so you get it amputated to find out it was a sprained muscle* (51).

On the other hand, several tweets compared Brexit with shooting at one's feet or face:

(9) *Brexit is like shooting yourself in the face* (74).

It is worth mentioning that a large amount of the instances from our corpus related Brexit with some kind of physical damage, either amputations, gunshots, or beatings, and some of them were almost identical to each other. These findings are very illustrative if we want to explore how Brexit is perceived by citizens and what feelings it gives rise to.

### **5.1.4. Relationships**

It is not surprising that many instances from our corpus relate the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union with that of a marriage or a divorce, since metaphorical thinking about international relationships as romantic ones has become conventional in our daily speech.

On account of this, several speakers used world knowledge about marriages, blind dates or divorces so as to describe how they perceive Brexit:

(10) *Brexit is like a divorcee trying to sell the benefits of divorce despite being happier married* (39).

- (11) *Brexit is like going on a blind date and then saying you have to marry your date even though he's disgusting* (28).

### **5.1.5. TV series, films, and fictional characters**

Another frequent kind of comparison was that between Brexit and TV series, films, or fictional characters, as in (5). Let us see some examples:

- (12) *Brexit is like Doctor Who, it's just keeps regenerating* (8).  
(13) *Brexit is like 'pretty little liars' at this point. Never ending but were still all tuning in* (16).  
(14) *Brexit is like the disastrous wedding in a romantic movie and you are waiting for Richard Gere or Hugh Grant to burst in and call the whole thing off but they never do and then you realise it isn't a romantic movie but a really long tragic arthouse movie and you can't escape* (85).

In (12), the comparison is made between the length of the Brexit process and the constant regenerations of Doctor Who: by means of this sentence, we understand this process as being never-ending, just as this character's life. (13) also refers to the lengthy process of withdrawal, and compares it to a well-known TV series that was strongly criticised for having too many seasons. Then, (14) compares the Brexit scenario with that of a wedding in a romantic movie. Thus, it activates the frame for this cinematic genre, and uses world knowledge when referring to two famous actors that usually appear in romantic movies. The shift from a romantic movie to a "tragic arthouse movie" also makes use of world knowledge and frames and is used to depict what Brexit really looks like for this speaker, no matter what it seemed to be at the beginning.

### **5.1.6. Fire and accidents**

Another frequent source domain is that of disasters and accidents. Within this category, there are examples relating Brexit with train wrecks or car accidents, and also with tidal waves or massive fires. In particular, fire was a very recurrent element in these comparisons, given that several tweets that belong to other categories (examples (3) and (4), in section 5.1.1, for instance) also included it so as to emphasise what they were representing.

Some examples comparing Brexit with accidents and disasters are the following:

- (15) *Brexit is like watching in slow motion a car crash, you can see the wall, car not stopping heading to a head-on collision. the scary part is you are a passenger that can't stop the mad driver and other passengers cheering him to go even faster* (32).
- (16) *Brexit is like a tidal wave, seeping all considerations before it* (77).
- (17) *Voting Conservative because you want Brexit is like burning your own house down because you hate the neighbours* (31).

## 5.2. Elaboration: occasional or necessary?

As argued in Section 3, authors that have explored simile and its components (Cuenca, 2015; Romano, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020) agree that the elaboration is a frequent element in this construction. The findings made by Romano (2017) conclude that the elaboration is usually present in *like*-based similes, given their open-ended nature. Our corpus corroborates this idea, since most of the similes we analysed do include an explanation that elaborates the comparison that is established.

Let us see, first, some examples of similes that lacked an elaboration:

- (18) *Brexit is like a train wreck in ultra slow motion* (22).
- (19) *Brexit is like a disease* (58).

In these examples, the elaboration is not needed given their highly conventional basis: both sentences give rise to frames based on our world knowledge, namely, train wrecks and diseases. Example (18) activates our knowledge about train accidents, their tragic nature, their mortality rate, and the main causes behind them (for example, high speed or technical problems). All of these elements are mapped onto the Brexit situation. The additional “in ultra slow motion” represents the slow process of withdrawal that has been unfolding since 2016.

On the other hand, (19) activates the frame for diseases, in which we have an illness (in this case, Brexit), patients (UK and EU citizens), and treatment (stopping Brexit). An elaboration is not necessary given the conventionality of these frames: the writers of these tweets were aware, although probably unconsciously, that any reader would understand these similes even if they did not elaborate them any further.

Consider now:

- (20) *Brexit is like shooting yourself in the foot* (47).

As we saw in Section 5.1.3, numerous tweets related Brexit with shooting at oneself. In this case, (20) constitutes a particular case, because it is present in our corpus both without an elaboration and with it:

(21) *Brexit is like shooting yourself in the foot because there's a stone in your shoe* (35).

These tweets were written by different people and were almost two weeks apart<sup>4</sup>, but they are very close to each other in terms of their structure and content. However, the elaboration in (21) (that is, the causal clause) adds an extra element: in this case, Brexit is not understood as a mere self-attack as in (20), but as a self-attack that is absurd and which could be solved by different, healthier, and more rational means (that is, by taking the shoe off and removing the stone). Therefore, examples (20) and (21) perfectly illustrate what we argued in Section 3: that the elaboration makes a simile much more effective (Cuenca, 2015: 159).

Let us now consider some examples of similes that were accompanied by an elaboration:

(22) *Brexit is like my diet: I'll start tomorrow* (12).

(23) *Voting for Brexit is like admitting you can't add 2&2 together. Why would you do it* (55).

(24) *Brexit is like Marmite. Lasts forever* (65).

In these three instances, the elaborations (respectively, “I’ll start tomorrow”, “why would you do it”, and “lasts forever”) are necessary so as to establish the grounds for the comparison. Since the comparisons are highly unconventional, the writer/speaker needs to guide the reader/hearer. In fact, without these three elaborations, the previous similes could be interpreted in a variety of ways. For instance, (22) could give rise to the inference “very difficult to achieve”. (23) could be interpreted as an insult to Brexit voters’ intelligence. (24) could be understood as relating Brexit with Marmite’s flavour, for example.

On account of this, the writer/speaker needs to make explicit in which way they want the reader/hearer to interpret the comparison. Either conscious or unconsciously, the writer/speaker is aware of the unconventionality of the comparison, and knows that it needs to be elaborated in order to be correctly interpreted.

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<sup>4</sup> (20) was tweeted on 8 December, 2019. (21) was tweeted on 26 November, 2019.



As was stated previously, the vast majority of the examples from our corpus do include an elaboration. The main mappings that were established are in most cases conventional, as we have seen in the previous section, but the qualities compared are indeed unconventional, unexpected, and daring. For example, (4) activates a mapping that could be conventional if the comparison were focused on the similarities between any political relationship and a game: both have “players” (the institutions involved), “rules” (laws and agreements), a goal, and so on. However, the person who wrote (4) did not aim at the conventional interpretation of this comparison; rather, this person wanted to express the idea that they perceive Brexit as irrational, illogic, confusing, etc., just as a board game without dice, with a burning board, and with no snakes or ladders, even if required by its name.

Along these lines, it can be argued that the elaboration is far more than occasional in similes. In the examples selected from our corpus, it is present in almost all of them. As Cuenca (2015) and Romano (2017) concluded, this part of a simile is necessary for interpretative purposes: without it, the intended comparison would probably not be achieved in most cases, but it is also essential for emphasis and effectiveness. As happened with (20) and (21), the elaboration provides an additional component that aims at the ironic, critical, or witty nature of the simile that is being employed. Speakers do not use similes for their own sake. In the case of Brexit, the tweets were meant to express discomfort and criticism about this situation. It is for this reason that there is not only an elaboration in most of the examples but it is also a highly developed one: the majority of the tweets are very long (within the 280-character limit that this platform imposes) on account of the detailed explanation following the simile.

### **5.3. Can similes be transformed into metaphors?**

In Sections 1 and 2 we argued that metaphors and similes have been traditionally considered interchangeable: allegedly, metaphors can be easily transformed into similes by adding “like”, and similes can be converted into metaphors by simply removing “like”. However, recent findings (Cuenca, 2015; Romano, 2017) prove that they are, actually, distinct figures that function in different contexts and with different purposes, and which cannot be transformed into each other in all contexts.

One of the aims of this essay is to shed some light on this issue. With this purpose in mind, let us consider some examples (the hashtag symbol is used to indicate oddity):

(25) *Brexit is like being punched in the face for no reason* (1).

# *Brexit is being punched in the face for no reason.*

If we remove the word “like” so as to transform the simile into a metaphor, the sentence acquires a completely different meaning. With the simile form, what is expressed is that the Brexit situation makes the speaker feel as if being punched in the face. With the metaphorical form, however, this meaning is not achieved.

(26) *Brexit is like my diet: I’ll start tomorrow* (12).

## *Brexit is my diet: I’ll start tomorrow.*

(27) *I feel Brexit is like a divorce and child custody. It will never be better, different yes. Better no* (70).

# *I feel Brexit is a divorce and child custody. It will never be better, different yes. Better no.*

(28) *Anyone voting for Johnson’s Brexit is like a turkey voting for Christmas, in other words, stupid* (79).

## *Anyone voting for Johnson’s Brexit is a turkey voting for Christmas, in other words, stupid.*

As happened in (25), these three similes are not easily convertible into metaphors without their meaning being altered. In (26), which we discussed earlier when addressing the elaboration, the metaphorical form would equate Brexit and the speaker’s diet, which is not clearly consistent with the elaboration. However, this is not what happens in the simile: Brexit and the diet are not treated as almost identical; what is mapped from the diet onto Brexit is the fact that it never actually happens because it is constantly delayed.

The same happens in (27) and (28). When removing the word “like” from each of these sentences, Brexit is attributed properties directly from the source domains, namely, a divorce and child custody in (27), and turkeys in (28). Nevertheless, the aim of these tweets is not to bring certain attributes from child custodies or turkeys onto Brexit, but to compare Brexit and these two entities in a very specific way (and this specific way is what is made explicit in the elaboration that accompanies both similes).

From these examples we can draw the conclusion that metaphors cannot always function as similes. As we have seen in (25), (26), (27), and (28), the simile form is not employed by chance. It is what allows the intended meaning to be achieved, something which would not happen with the metaphorical forms.

Nevertheless, not all of the examples from our corpus are impossible to transform into metaphors. There are some of them that, indeed, could avoid the word “like” and maintain their

original meaning. However, it is important to bear in mind that the majority of the similes are non-convertible, and those which are convertible fulfil a specific characteristic: they are conventional and, thus, easily interpretable both as similes and as metaphors. Let us comment on some of them.

- (29) *Anyone else notice how Brexit is like a loot box for racist boomers? They don't care: what's inside, how much it costs, why it should happen, all the risks — they just want it (3).*

*Anyone else notice how Brexit is a loot box for racist boomers? They don't care: what's inside, how much it costs, why it should happen, all the risks — they just want it.*

In this case, the word “like” could be omitted and the sentence would be as natural and meaningful as with the simile form. This is so because of the fact that the mapping is conventional and knowledge about treasures and loot boxes is shared by almost any speaker. As Romano (2017: 18) points out, “when target and source domains are highly conventional, metaphor and simile can be interchangeable”. Still, it is worth noting that the elaboration (“They don't care (...) they just want it”) is more natural in the simile form. Although elaborations can happen with metaphors, they are more frequent and expected with similes.

- (30) *Brexit is like a disease (58).*

*Brexit is a disease.*

As we saw in previous sections, (30) makes use of a conventional mapping: that of diseases. In fact, as Ungerer and Schmid (1996: 150) argue, the metaphor THE COUNTRY IS A DISEASED PERSON is commonly found in political speech. In this case, the disease is Brexit, the patient is the UK and the treatment is voting against Brexit. Therefore, this simile could function as a metaphor because of its highly conventional nature.

- (31) *Brexit is like an adopted child jumping from foster home to foster home. Let's hope there is no more government changes in the UK (78).*

*Brexit is an adopted child jumping from foster home to foster home. Let's hope there is no more government changes in the UK.*

The same occurs with (31). Metaphorical thinking about orphan children, foster homes, adoptions, etc., is basic in our daily speech. On account of this, Brexit could be regarded as an adopted child because most speakers share common knowledge about adopted children and orphanages. Therefore, it is conventional to think of a political process that moves from one government to another as an orphan who moves from one home to another.

To conclude, it is important to mention that metaphors and similes, although distinct and independent from each other, are not incompatible figures. In fact, they are usually found together:

(32) *Brexit is like a drug addiction affecting nearly half the UK adult population. The Tories are the dealers* (4).

In (32), the first sentence contains a simile that compares Brexit to a drug addiction, and the second sentence is a metaphor that develops the previous simile. In other words, the simile activates the frame for drugs (it includes the drugs, their effects, the dealers, the addicts, possible legal problems, etc.), which serves as a starting point for the metaphorical elaboration. This co-occurrence of metaphors and similes is not unusual whatsoever, as has been noted by some scholars (e.g. Croft and Cruse, 2004: 215; Leech, 1991: 157).

## 6. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored simile, a figurative use of language that has been traditionally overshadowed in the literature by metaphor. To make up for this analytical gap, we have studied Brexit-based similes published on Twitter. This study, based on tools offered by Cognitive Linguistics to this effect, has pursued three main goals: first, to determine the main mappings involved in these similes; second, to explore the kind of elaboration of the grounds for comparison that is highly frequent in similes in order to further determine how, when, and why it is present in, or absent from, the examples in our corpus; third, to answer the question on whether similes and metaphors are interchangeable, and why, or why not.

In the first part of our analysis, we have argued that the vast majority of the tweets from our corpus were grounded in counterfactual scenarios, that is, those that are contrary to reality. In the corpus, counterfactual scenarios were used by speakers to express how absurd, unreal, and confusing they think Brexit is.

In addition, the corpus attests to the wide variety of mappings engaged by Twitter users to address Brexit. For example, many of the tweets compared Brexit to people that are about to leave but remain where they are. Through this comparison, these tweets address the long process of withdrawal from the European Union that the United Kingdom has undergone since the 2016 referendum. Other instances based the comparison on people who lie or trick others, especially when attempting to criticise British politicians and their way of tackling Brexit. One of the most frequent mappings in our corpus was that of physical violence, which included several examples comparing Brexit with amputations or with gunshots at oneself. Additionally, relationships (blind dates, divorces, etc.) and characters from TV series and films were also common source domains in many tweets. The last main mapping we have explored is that of fire and accidents. In particular, we have seen that fire is a recurrent element in many tweets, even if their main source domain was different. All these source domains provide insights into different negative aspects of Brexit, the positive aspects being absent from the corpus. This should not necessarily lead to think that simile, and especially, simile containing grounds elaboration, has a higher potential for the expression of negative value judgments. This is a point that should be explored further on the basis of larger corpora related to other topics. Brexit is a very sensitive issue and there is a possibility that Brexit supporters do not make extensive use of social networks or of the same social networks as detractors.

The second part of our analysis was devoted to the elaboration, one of the main constituents in similes according to several scholars (Cuenca, 2015; Romano, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza,

2020). More specifically, we have explored the reasons for its absence or presence in our examples. As we have seen, most of the tweets from our corpus did include an elaboration, and those which did not were highly conventional. The similes that lacked an elaboration were conventional enough to give rise to certain frames that allowed the comparison to be easily interpretable. However, those similes that did appear with an elaboration were not conventional. As we have seen, the elaboration is necessary in order to establish the grounds for the comparison, and also to guide the reader to what the writer intends to mean. Without this element, the similes we have explored could be interpreted in many different ways, but the elaboration allows the reader to derive the specific interpretation aimed at by the writer. Furthermore, we have also argued that the elaboration was highly developed in many instances, thus giving the writer the opportunity to emphasise their opinions in a more powerful and effective way.

The aim of the third part of our analysis was to explore whether metaphors and similes are interchangeable or not. In this respect, we provided examples of potential transformation of similes into metaphors through the deletion of the comparative preposition “like”. The results were of two types. On the one hand, the majority of our examples could not be clearly transformed into metaphors, since removing the word “like” changed the sentence meaning completely. On many occasions, the metaphorical form attributes certain source properties to the target domain. However, the simile form compares two entities in a very specific way that is explicit in the elaboration. On the other hand, some similes could be converted into metaphors because they were conventional. These examples were usually grounded in well-known metaphors, such as THE COUNTRY IS A DISEASED PERSON, and thus the transformation from simile into metaphor is perfectly feasible. Nevertheless, these were special cases: most of the examples from our corpus established unexpected, non-conventional mappings, and because of that they needed an elaboration that detracted from their convertibility into metaphors since their meaning was altered.

Finally, we have noted that metaphors and similes, although independent from each other, are not incompatible figures. As some scholars have previously argued (Croft and Cruse, 2004: 215; Leech, 1991: 157), they usually co-occur, as was evidenced by some of the examples from our corpus.

This essay has shown that metaphors and similes are not always interchangeable. In fact, as we have seen, similes have a particular structure and specific discourse purposes that differ from those of metaphors in many cases. Furthermore, we have carried out this analysis with the guide of analytical categories offered by Cognitive Linguistics, such as frames or scenarios.

This paper could be developed so as to elaborate on how the similes from our corpus interact with other figures, such as metonymy, hyperbole, or irony, which are also present in most instances from our corpus and which have been left unmentioned here due to space constraints. Additionally, future research could be conducted in order to further explore the relationship between metaphors and similes and the ways in which they are similar and different, so as to support—or refute—the findings made in this paper.

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## **8. Appendix: corpus of analysis**